

Pressure Stress and Burnout

'Stress' is the buzzword of today and as a result, if we are feeling fairly content with life, we can easily dismiss the whole concept of stress. Most of us thrive on a certain amount of pressure – we are able to achieve more than we anticipated and when the project is over and the demands decline, we feel a sense of satisfaction at a job well done. We can relax, knowing that the intense pressure is over and life will once again return to a more realistic pace.

If the level of stress is sustained and without remittance for long periods of time, problems may start that can, if unmanaged, spiral out of control. Our productivity peaks initially but then declines quite rapidly. We may feel we have to work longer and harder to achieve unrealistic targets or deadlines. Sleep may be disrupted, and appetite may change dramatically, concentration decreases and we can experience mood swings. Relationships at work and at home suffer.

Many feel that stress is an 'attitude of mind' and signals weakness in others, making it difficult to seek or accept support from colleagues, family or friends. In fact it is nothing of the sort; it is a physical response generated automatically by the body and, if left unresolved, is dangerous and damaging. In its extreme, we may experience burnout, resulting in mental ill-health such as a mental breakdown. In a worse case scenario it can lead to suicide.

Accountancy practices and partnerships need to be aware of the impact that stress and stress-related illnesses can have on productivity. Absence from work for repeated minor illnesses may increase significantly because of the physiological impact stress has on an individual. Mood swings and behavioural changes can damage relationships within the work-place, which can result in lost productivity as colleagues gather in groups to discuss outbursts or comfort aggrieved colleagues.

The reputation of a practice may be damaged if complaints are received from clients. Litigation might ensue as a result of complaints from members of staff or from the individual themselves – employers have a duty of care and if appropriate steps are not taken when an employee has been identified as suffering from stress, the practice may be taken to Employment Tribunal.



At CABA (The Chartered Accountants' Benevolent Association) we recognised that a significant number of the enquiries received from Chartered Accountants experiencing financial difficulties had underlying problems that were stress related. These included alcoholism, gambling, debt and mental ill health. As prevention is always better than cure, CABA now also provides additional support through a free 24-hour helpline (call freephone 0800 107 6163 or overseas +44 (0)1788 556366), stress management and wellbeing training, and a range of factsheets online caba.org.uk.

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